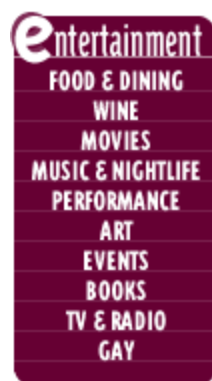


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Lawmaker, survivor

Thursday, June 1, 2000

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Rep. Tom Lantos' rock-solid views grounded in history

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SAN BRUNO - The Memorial Day service at the Golden Gate National Cemetery was over, and vets started coming up to Rep. Tom Lantos, D-Burlingame, telling him about the trouble they were having getting a medal or getting their checks on time or getting an answer out of the bureaucrats in Washington. A few walked up slowly, tentatively, just wanting to shake Lantos' hand, to be as close to a congressman as they would ever be.

One gray-haired man wearing a VFW cap extended his hand and said, "You're the only Democrat I've ever voted for in my life, you know? I like the way you do things. You should've been a Republican."

Lantos, 72, nodded and said, "You're not the first to say that."

Lantos, elected to 10 straight terms in Congress from the 12th District, seems a shoo-in for the November election, having garnered 74 percent of the vote in the open primary last March. "To get that kind of backing, I must've drawn more than a few Republican votes," said Lantos, who cited the transportation projects and low unemployment on the Peninsula as reasons for his re-elections.

The ceremonies at the Golden Gate Cemetery marked another day in the life of Lantos, a survivor of the Holocaust who has served two decades in Congress and sees himself getting elected, and elected again, as a reflection of economic good times spilling from the Democratic White House. But it wasn't always this easy. Lantos' first year in Congress saw him hanging on by his fingernails in a hostile House of

Representatives, one filled with Republicans flush from the donkey-kicking election of 1980, when Washington had its own version of the Elephant Walk as the GOP rode in on Ronald Reagan's massive coattails.

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"There was a huge Republican landslide that year," said Lantos. "Only two Democrats got in, and one of them beat an indicted Republican. So I was the only Democrat to beat an unindicted incumbent Republican that year. Someday that'll be a great footnote."

Lantos remembers his first day on the floor of the House - the 13th of January, 1981 - seeing it as crystal-clear as it was when he stepped into the Capitol building, a 52-year-old rookie Congressman.

"Being an immigrant, the opportunity of serving in Congress is obviously a permanent high," he said. "I really felt I had an opportunity to do my level best, not only on behalf of my constituents, but for the millions of people who have been allowed to come to this country, to repay the freedom and opportunity we gained by becoming American citizens."

Lantos, a native of Hungary who survived the death camps of World War II but lost his family in the Holocaust, moved through displaced-persons camps after the war before coming to the United States. In the 1999 documentary, "The Last Days," which chronicles the fate of Hungary's Jews at the end of the war, Lantos described his experience of steaming across the Atlantic to America as being unreal.

Lantos, who won a postwar

scholarship to study at the University of Washington, lined up for his first meal aboard ship to see wicker baskets filled with oranges and bananas. He asked a seaman if he could have one and was told, "Man, you can eat all the damn bananas and all the damn oranges you want." "It was then I knew I was in heaven," said Lantos.

Lantos became a citizen in 1953 and, less

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than 30 years later, stood on the floor of the House, overwhelmed by what he was seeing. "Those two dates sort of stand out as the ultimate," said Lantos, whose white hair belies a mind filled with intellectual firecrackers set off by someone half his age.

"I feel, intellectually, I'm at my peak," said Lantos. "I feel better than many people 20 years younger than I am. I swim an hour every morning with my wife and we go for long, long walks, both here and in

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Washington.

"We have 17 grandchildren, and keep up a personal friendship with each one. My wife works full time, unpaid, in my office, and this summer we celebrate our 50th wedding anniversary," Lantos said. "We have an incredibly full life."

Lantos and his wife, Annette, had two daughters, both of whom promised a gift of grandchildren to their parents. "Because my wife and I were survivors of the Holocaust, because our own families were killed, the gift to us was to

give us as many grandchildren as possible, to keep alive the names of those who were lost," said Lantos. He paused, his voice softening, and said, "Our cup runneth over."

One of Lantos' daughters has 10 children ("Aged three to 21, no twins") while the other, married to the U.S. ambassador to Denmark, has seven. This summer the entire family will gather in Copenhagen to celebrate the Lantos' wedding anniversary, and then the congressman will return to the States to start gearing up for the 2002 election. It feels odd to think that far ahead, said Lantos, but that's the way things are done these days.

"I'm one of those in Congress who thinks campaign fund-raising is getting out of hand. I favor shortening campaigns, both presidential and congressional," he said. "The British do this far more intelligently - a shorter period of campaigning in which you can still gauge the qualities of candidates and their positions."

Lantos was also concerned about the lack of privacy for those running for public office. "I feel very strongly there ought to be a zone of privacy. But there isn't at the moment. In this day and age you can't say you didn't know your life will be probed. Both Bush and Gore went into this with their eyes open."

The clank and clatter of candidates' private lives being pulled open like so many cans of sardines keeps the United States in the spotlight, doing shadow dances for the amusement of other nations. But the combination of bozoism, naiveté and raw power makes the

United States unique and, because of those qualities, the rest of the world can breathe easy.

"Imagine if the Soviet Union had won the Cold War, or Hitler and Germany became the preeminent nation in the world," said Lantos. "The whole world is very lucky it is the United States, but they don't understand and don't appreciate that."

"They may laugh at the (White House) scandal, but they admire what the Clinton-Gore administration has achieved - the biggest period of prosperity in American history."

Lantos, a strong supporter of the military, laid credit for these flush times at the door of the armed forces. In the 23 years Lantos has been attending Memorial Day ceremonies at San Bruno, the United States appeared at peace. "But, in fact, this country has been engaged in the winning of three wars," he said.

"In 1991, we won the Third World War, commonly known as the Cold War, largely because of the courage of our military. A few years ago, we won the war in the Persian Gulf, and last year, despite all the cynics and the doubters and all the naysayers, the U.S. won the war in Kosovo against a new dictator named Milosevic."

"The last one, we won without a single American soldier being killed in battle," said Lantos, who added a warning to China, Russia, Iraq, Iran and worldwide terrorist organizations. "Although your motives may not be as clear-cut as Hitler's in World War II or North Korea's or Vietnam's, we are ready

for you. The United States stands ready, as it always has, to protect the interest of its citizens and the interest of freedom around the globe."

Right now, though, said Lantos, what concerns him is the deterioration of the American family. The United States offers "unprecedented promise combined with a great deal of inner probing and a lack of happiness," he said. "I personally am surprised at the decline in the strength of the American family. I am convinced most Americans would feel times were good if their own families gained the strength they used to have."

"The single most serious problem we're facing is a gradual loss of a feeling of community," Lantos said. "We're living in an infinitely more selfish era. Schools, neighborhoods, families. . . . We all need to rebuild the sense of community, which generations ago was taken for granted."


Nothing, said Lantos, should be taken for granted in these United States.

Nothing. <



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